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AUTHOR Larsen, Vernon W.; Wright, H. Curtis
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ABSTRACT

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical framework that derives from critical humanism through social psychology and is presented as an alternative to sociological and psychological views of social reality. This paper analyzes the general arguments of symbolic interactionism, its portrayal of people as responsible agents, and its interpretive methodology. Rather than constructing realities that are located either within individual consciousness or within sociocultural environments, symbolic interactionism interprets the process of interaction itself. The approach therefore looks to linguistic and cognitive phenomena for information about the covert self whose overt behavior is being observed. The interactionist perspective is critical of psychology, with its structuralist, kinds-of-people theories, and of sociology, with its organizational, kinds-of-situation theories. Human beings' unique biological potential for conceptual thinking, as manifested through language, facilitates social interaction, which leads to reasoning and social control, and thus to the development of society. Distinctively human behavior emerges from a rational process that is constructed by the self. The basic weakness in conventional theoretical approaches is the treatment of human behavior as the product of antecedent conditions. Participant observation and longitudinal study are held to be appropriate investigative methodologies. (CJH)

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SYMBOLIC INTERACTION THEORY

By Vernon W. Larsen and H. Curtis Wright

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ABSTRACT: Symbolic Interactionism is an outgrowth of the attempt we now know as social psychology to steer a middle course between sociology, with its kinds-of-situation theories, and psychology, with its kinds-of-people theories. Thus, it emphasizes realities which are neither in people nor in their natural, social, or cultural environments, but in the process of interaction itself. It therefore concentrates on language and on thinking in order to study the covert self whose overt behavior is being observed. For these and similar reasons symbolic interaction theory rejects such things as antecedent traits or conditions as determiners of human behavior, argues that rational conduct is constructed in an intelligent process of social interaction, and insists on first-hand experience, participant observation, and longitudinal study as proper instruments for investigating human phenomena.

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SYMBOLIC INTERACTION THEORY

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> The primacy of theoretical knowledge ... becomes the axial principle [of modern culture].... Industrial society is the coordination of machines and men for the production of goods. [But] post-industrial society is organized around knowledge, [which is utilized] for the purpose of ... directing ... innovation and change.... What is distinctive about [the twentieth century] ... is the [distinct] change in the character of knowledge itself.... What has become decisive ... is the centrality of theoretical knowledge--the primacy of theory over empiricism and the codification of knowledge into abstract systems of symbols that can be used to illuminate many ... [if not most] areas of experience.[1]

This paper looks briefly at the concerns and general arguments of symbolic interactionism. It attempts, as a kind of minimum objective, to explain a relatively unfamiliar way of thinking about human behavior which constitutes an important alternative to the sociological and psychological views of social reality.[2] The disparate outlooks of sociology, psychology,

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[1]Daniel Bell, The Coming of Post-industrial Society; a Venture in Social Forecasting (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 18-20. Italics ours. Bell is a moving force in the current tendency, which is growing vigorously in the social sciences and elsewhere, to reject the mechanistic methodologies in favor of "a new mode of inquiry that draws heavily on the humanities," Karen J. Winkler, "Questioning the Science in Social Science; Scholars Signal a 'Turn to Interpretation,'" Chronicle of Higher Education, vol. 30, no. 17 (June 26, 1985), 5-6. This movement should be of great interest to symbolic interactionists, who deal with issues that lie at the very heart of its concerns.

[2]Symbolic interaction theory has independent origins in Germany through the writings of Georg Simmel, Max Weber, and others. But its American origins are found in the writings of such men as Charles H. Cooley, who formulated concepts of the primary group and the looking-glass self, and W. I. Thomas, who emphasized definitions of the situation. The most important early formulation of this perspective is George Herbert Mead's posthumously published Mind, Self, and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934). This volume was assembled by Mead's students, who put it together by comparing their class notes with the notes of a professional stenographer employed to transcribe his lectures. Mead wrote sparingly; but few men have so profoundly influenced social-psychological thinking, and if anyone can be thought of as the father of symbolic interactionism it is he. Others who have had an important influence include Kimball Young, Ephraim Ericksen, Edwin Sutherland, and Arnold Rose. Still another is Herbert Blumer, the heir apparent to George Herbert Mead, whose Symbolic Interactionism; Perspective and Method (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969) is firmly established in social psychology. Blumer's early critique of the five

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and social psychology, be it noted, are not merely theories: they are theoretical frameworks or perspectives--distinct and separate ways of generating different kinds of theories about human phenomena. They have produced virtually all of the specific theories and formulations of social science; and they are ultimately traceable to the psychophysical dualism of the classical world view,[3] for psychology and sociology, which have more in common with each other than either has with the interactionist perspective, are based on the mechanistic models of scientific physics whereas symbolic interactionism is derived from critical humanism through social psychology.

Some assumptions and characteristics of the interactionist perspective in social psychology may be stated. First, symbolic interaction theory dissents from both major schools of social science theory: it is critical, in other words, of psychology (with its kinds-of-people theories) and of sociology (with its kinds-of-situation theories, which are better known as structural-functional and organizational theories). Second, the features of human behavior which distinguish it from the behavior of other animals are all derived from the fact that man is an inveterate manipulator of symbols, and almost certainly the only symbol-manipulating animal.[4] This fact marks

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volumes comprising W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki, The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1918-1920) and studies like Walter Coutu's Emergent Human Nature (New York: Knopf, 1949) have won many converts to social psychology. The most important text books in the field have been those by Kimball Young, Ellsworth Faris, Theodore Newcomb, Alfred Lindesmith and Anselm Strauss, Tamotsu Shibutani, and Glenn Vernon. Books of basic readings, which have stimulated broad interest in the viewpoints of symbolic interactionism, include compilations by Arnold Rose, Jerome Manis and Bernard Meltzer, and Gregory Stone and Harvey Farberman.

[3]The classical world view is discussed in H. Curtis Wright, "The Symbol and its Referent: an Issue for Library Education," Library Trends, vol. 34, no. 4 (Spring, 1986), 730-37.

[4]The language ability of chimpanzees, for example, is purely pragmatic and nonmathetic, according to John C. Eccles, "The Mystery of Personal Existence," Scholar and Educator, vol. 7, no. 1 (Spring, 1983), 6-7. This conclusion, which is based on Thomas A. Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok, eds., Speaking of Apes; a Critical Anthology of Two-way Communication with Man (New York: Plenum Press, 1980), is elaborated in "The Language Training of Apes," in John C. Eccles and Daniel N. Robinson, The Wonder of Being Human; Our Brain and Our Mind (New York: Free Press, 1984), 109-113, and in "Language and Human Thought: a Reappraisal," ibid., 119-23. For further elaboration

an important difference between man and the rest of the animals, since it forces researchers to focus on language and on thinking in order to understand human behavior. Third, although language is biologically potential in man, its development would not be possible without social interaction. Fourth, man lives in a symbolic environment where all social objects, including the self as a social object, are interpreted by the individual: they are always perceived as definitions of the situation and are never seen as mere physical stimuli. In order to understand human behavior, therefore, researchers must take into account the meaning of things to the covert self whose overt behavior they are observing. Fifth, social interaction facilitated by language leads to the development of human reasoning, to self-consciousness, to social control, and thus to the development of human society. Sixth, people are not passive objects buffeted by organic drives and environmental forces--not even by sexual instincts or organizational structures: they are individual selves, active subjects who construct intelligent behavior in a process of social interaction by selecting and interpreting their environment, and thus in some sense by creating it. Distinctively human behavior, in other words, emerges from a rational process that is not determined by heredity or environment but is constructed by the self. Seventh, through language, individuals take on or internalize the attitudes of others toward both the environment and themselves; and, through a process of role-taking mediated by identification and association with significant others, they acquire social selves and internalize the attitudes of those significant to them, as well as the attitudes of the "generalized other"--that is, the attitudes of the group or the community. Finally, an individual need not and cannot be totally controlled by the internalized attitudes of other people. The objective me-

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by Eccles, see his The Human Mystery (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1979), 87, 118, 121, his The Human Psyche (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1980), 195, 233-34, and Karl R. Popper and John C. Eccles, The Self and its Brain (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1981), 440, 469-70. There are also numerous accounts of this problem by symbolic interactionists, such as Robert H. Lauer and Warren H. Handel, Social Psychology: the Theory and Application of Symbolic Interactionism (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 17, 22-32, 34-41, 56; and "The Evolutionary Setting of Human Behavior," in Alfred R. Lindesmith, Anselm L. Strauss, and Norman K. Denzin, Social Psychology (5th ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), 52-82.

self, to use Mead's terminology, is more controlled than controlling in a normal human being, who is also an I-self, an active subject who takes account of its me-self but is not dominated by it. Thus, the I-self, far from being the victim of internal and external circumstances, is fully capable of acting upon, influencing, and modifying the social process.

Howard Becker's explanation of deviant behavior in Outsiders (1963)[5] illustrates the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism and calls attention to some of its important characteristics. Becker, a jazz pianist who obtained his data through fifty intensive interviews with marijuana-using musicians, describes how deviant behavior develops by focusing on their use of this drug. He argues that marijuana use is learned in an orderly sequence of steps that are directly related to changes which occur first of all in the privacy of a person's psyche, where one's perspectives on reality are altered, and only subsequently in the public domain, where one's changed perspectives are expressed in behavior. Each step, Becker argues, requires theoretical explanation: we need one kind of theory for describing exactly how people come into situations where marijuana is readily available; another for explaining why, given the availability of marijuana, they are willing to experiment with it; and still another for explaining why, having experimented with marijuana, they continue to use it. Each of these steps, according to Becker, constitutes a necessary cause of deviant behavior, since confirmed marijuana users cannot exist unless they become drug addicts because marijuana is available to people who experiment with it and continue to use it.

Becker's study criticizes both of the traditional methodologies in social science, which assume that the basic difference between deviant behavior and the behavior of those who conform to social norms lies either in the subjective character of an experiencing self or in the objective characteristics of an experienced world. His criticism thus encompasses psychological theories, which trace the causes of deviance to needs developed

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[5]The second edition of this work (New York: Free Press, 1973) should also be consulted, since it adds Chapter 10, "Labelling Theory Revisited," which answers criticisms of Becker's interactionist outlook in the first edition. See also Becker's "Becoming a Marihuana User," in John A. O'Donnell and John C. Ball, eds., Narcotic Addiction (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 109-122.

in an individual's early experiences, and sociological theories, which look for socially structured sources of strain that pressure individuals to seek illegitimate ways of solving problems created by their positions in the social system. Such theories, Becker says, account neither for the many marijuana users who do not exhibit the traits or conditions believed to cause their behavior nor for the changes observable in an individual's behavior over time. But these changes, which are difficult to explain by traditional theories, are easily explained as the behavioral consequences of mental changes in people's concepts of marijuana: when their ways of thinking about marijuana change, in other words, their ways of relating to marijuana, which are always expressed in their behavior, will also change as a result thereof. Thus, marijuana use is a direct outcome of the human conceptual understanding of marijuana; and this understanding of the uses and users of marijuana grows and develops in any person whose experience with the drug increases.

The first step in becoming a marijuana user is to master the proper smoking technique, or its use will not produce the enjoyable effects which enable people to change their concepts of the drug: they must learn to smoke it in a way that produces real results. Secondly, they must become capable of recognizing the effects of smoking marijuana: they must learn, in the language of the addict, to "get high;" and they must also be able to make a conceptual connection between their use of the drug and the effects which are caused by using it, for otherwise, they will never become marijuana users. And finally, they must learn to enjoy the effects of using the drug, since its use cannot continue unless they redefine the effects of smoking it as enjoyable. These steps are all necessary; but they are not sufficient for establishing a stable pattern of drug use. Something else is required, for potential users of marijuana must still contend with powerful forces of social control which limit their access to drugs and make drug use seem inexpedient or immoral or both. Even if people have learned to enjoy marijuana, therefore, they cannot become marijuana users until they deal with the problems of drug availability and with the fact that they themselves interpret the use of drugs as deviant behavior. On the one hand, then, each level of marijuana use, from beginning to routine, must have distinctive sources of supply, since no one becomes a drug user without a goodly supply of drugs. But interaction groups in which marijuana is used tend to weaken

one level's controlled supply of the drug by increasing access to its use on other levels. Since they do this partly through the sensitive modification of controls over specific levels of drug use, there are forces within these groups that press individuals toward the use of new sources of supply. Changes in the modes of access to the drug create in turn conditions favoring movement to new levels of use; and changes in group participation and membership then lead to changes in the level of use by affecting the individual's access to marijuana. And on the other hand, the use of marijuana is also limited by the fear, realistic or otherwise, that those nonusers of the drug who are important to its users will discover their use of marijuana and react in some punishing way. This kind of control breaks down only as users discover that their fears are unrealistic, or as they come to conceive of drug use as something that can be kept secret, or as significant others become insignificant to them, or when powerful others lose their power over them. Thus, the use of marijuana, at any level from casual to regular, can occur only when its potential users have revised their idea of the dangers involved in its use in such a way as to allow for drug-using behavior.

The moral imperatives which operate to control marijuana use require individuals to be rationally responsible for their actions. The stereotype of a dope fiend portrays a person who violates these imperatives. People who take such a stereotype seriously will not begin, maintain, or increase the use of marijuana unless they can neutralize their sensitivity to the stereotype by accepting some alternative view of drug use: they must inhibit the force of powerful moral norms through techniques of neutralization; they may argue, for example, that there are many things worse than drug addiction, and thus avoid the impact of conventional commitments. This underscores the importance of self images, for committing improper acts and being caught at them reveals individuals as different kinds of people than they are supposed to be. Thus, they are labeled as deviants--as fairies, dope fiends, nuts, or lunatics--and treated accordingly. This treatment of deviants as if they were all bad, as though they were generally rather than specifically deviant, produces self-fulfilling prophecies: it shapes people in the images other people have of them by reducing their participation in conventional groups, by denying them the means of carrying out common everyday tasks, and by

forcing them to interact with other deviants; and it leads to their further development of deviant skills and motivations. Once addicted, however, drug use can be discontinued only when the ability to enjoy the experience of being high is lost--that is, when there is another drastic change in the user's concept of marijuana, which is occasioned by various kinds of negative experience with the drug. But that is a tough thing to change.

This paper is not concerned with the correctness or incorrectness of Becker's explanations; it is concerned with his approach, with his way of studying the problems of marijuana use, because it exemplifies at least five important characteristics of the symbolic interactionist perspective. 1. He rejects antecedent traits or conditions as determiners of drug use: it simply isn't so, he says, that prior conditions, either in the social structure or in the individual, cause people to become drug users. 2. He treats marijuana use as learned behavior constructed in a process of social interaction. 3. He asserts that marijuana use is the behavioral result of an individual's changing mental concepts. Thus, the meaning of things to the individual is important, because no one can become a marijuana user unless one's I-self learns to interpret its me-self as the kind of person who uses drugs. 4. He interprets societal reactions to the users of marijuana as a potent factor in its use, since being caught and labeled as a marajuana user plays a crucial role in creating deviance. 5. He insists on first-hand experience, participant observation, and longitudinal study as methodological tools for investigating human phenomena generally, and for understanding the specific problems of marijuana users.

Strong support for the symbolic interactionist perspective, and specifically for Becker's contention that addicts cannot exist unless people form abstract concepts which enable them to understand the relationship between their use of drugs and the delayed effects of using them is provided by Alfred Lindesmith's controversy with certain pharmacologists about causal factors in drug addiction.[6] He insists bluntly that primates like the

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[6]Alfred R. Lindesmith, "Can Chimpanzees Become Morphine Addicts?" Journal of Comparative Psychology, 39 (1946), 109-117. Later studies of addiction by Lindesmith include his Opiate Addiction (Bloomington, Ind.: Principia Press, 1947); The Addict and the Law (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1965); "Basic Problems in the Social Psychology of

chimpanzees, for example, cannot become morphine addicts. His argument? Although animals may experience "highs" if administered drugs by human beings, addiction to opiates, which necessarily involves conceptual skills and the understanding and use of language symbols, can occur only in human society. Chimpanzees, as well as other animals and some people, are unable to formulate abstract concepts or to use language symbols, and by virtue of that fact cannot become genuine addicts. His crucial argument is that the nonhuman animals, not being symbol manipulators, live only in the here and now of sensory experience and lack the noetic ability to conceptualize the temporal or causal connections between maintaining a series of injections and avoiding the distress of withdrawal symptoms (which may occur as late as two or three days after the injections have ceased).[7] But that conceptual and linguistic ability, which is missing in the nonhuman primates, is precisely what hooks the human animal on drugs. Addiction, therefore, is not a phenomenon shared by the human and nonhuman animals: it is a uniquely human phenomenon that is made possible by the symbolic nature of language and conceptual thought. Thus, only socialized beings can become psychologically addicted to opiates; the insane, the extremely feebleminded, young children, and nonhuman animals cannot. People are the only animals who, through the manipulation of symbols, can think up and rehearse intended transactions which they plan to carry out, or generate meanings and meaningful behavior apart from concrete events.

The rise of the interactionist perspective in social science theory is instructive. 1908 was a landmark in the history of an attempt we now call social psychology to steer a middle course between the Scylla of sociology, with its kinds-of-situation theories, and the Charibdis of psychology, with its kinds-of-people theories. Two important books were published in that year, Social Psychology, by Edward A. Ross, a sociologist at the University

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Addiction and a Theory," in O'Donnell and Ball, eds., Narcotic Addiction, 91-109; and Addiction and Opiates (Chicago: Aldine, 1968).

[7]It remains doubtful, although it is not conclusively established, that chimpanzees can even be taught to make the abstract connection between being given a fast-acting drug and the high which follows only minutes later. It should be noted, however, that "high" chimpanzees resemble hospital patients who take drugs, not addicts who are hooked on drugs.

of Wisconsin, and An Introduction to Social Psychology, by William McDougall, a psychologist from Oxford and Cambridge in England. Ross, a social determinist who emphasized the primacy of collective values by exalting the group over the individual, argued for the inadequacy of any psychology that minimized social influences. His central thesis is illustrated by his insistence that, without social interaction, the psychic development of a child would be arrested at a level barely distinguishable from idiocy. But McDougall centered his social psychology squarely in the individual. Directly or indirectly, he argued, instincts are the prime movers of all interaction and social life. Take away instinctive dispositions with their powerful impulses and the organism would be incapable of activity: it would lie inert and motionless, like a wonderful clockwork whose mainspring has been removed. This divergence in social psychology--between sociological theories based on group values and psychological theories based on individual values--has persisted in subtle but significant ways right down to the present time. It was lamented in the early fifties by Theodore Newcomb, a psychologist profoundly influenced by his close relationship with sociology.

> I am dissatisfied with ... social psychology.... [I deplore the fact] that there are two social psychologies thriving in the land--not one.... I am dissatisfied with both.
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> Take first ... the psychological approach to social psychology.... My basic dissatisfaction ... is that it has never really faced the implications of the psychologist's claim to study the "organism in [its] environment".... [The psychologically trained] social psychologists ... take no systematic account ... of the social environment in which human organisms live. More specifically, they minimize or even ignore ... the social structure.... They often speak and write as if the differences between the human and non-human environments could be ignored. The result ... comes perilously close to being ... social psychology without people.... [Theirs is] the fallacy of assuming that a human environment introduces no new problems into the study of psychological processes.
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> The sociologically trained social psychologists have ... made different but no less serious errors. They have never come to terms with the biological and psychological conditions under which human organisms selectively participate in their environments. Their fallacy ... has been that of assuming that human organisms are virtually empty receptacles into which culture is simply poured.... [They] have seemed to assume that ... not only may the receptacles be regarded as more or less equivalent but [that] the

nature of the process by which they get filled can more or less be taken for granted.[8]

The psychologists have continued to emphasize kinds-of-people theories. We are confronted every day with this type of thinking by those who shrug off the immorality of minorities, for example, with comments like: "What else can you expect from them?" The implication of all such statements, of course, is that inherent characteristics determine behavior. This kind of theory is also illustrated by the lawyer's plea of insanity, which is based on the argument that his client's behavior was governed by impulses or compulsions over which he had no real control.[9] It is further illustrated in a fascinating little book by E. L. Thorndike entitled Your City (1939), which attempts to explain how good and effective cities are constituted: he concludes that some American cities are better than others primarily and chiefly because, for whatever reason, they were fortunate enough to obtain good and able people as residents. A more subtle argument along these lines is presented in David McClelland's The Achieving Society. McClelland, who wonders what makes a community or a nation great, answers that America became great, not because its frontiers provided unlimited resources that offered a challenge and a stimulus to development, but because of the characteristics of its people. It was the achievement-oriented immigrants to America who regarded the frontier as a challenge to be overcome: it was not the frontier, therefore, that made the immigrants achievement-oriented, for opportunities like new frontiers always exist; but it takes a special kind of person to see them and to provide what it takes to exploit them. These authors, mind you, are not naive psychologists: they are among the best in the business. McClelland becomes magnificently social-psychological,

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[8]Theodore M. Newcomb, "Social Psychological Theory: Integrating Individual and Social Approaches," in Social Psychology at the Crossroads, eds. J. H. Rohrer and M. Sherif (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 31-33.

[9]The plea of insanity, however, may simply mean that a lawyer is reading the public pulse in order to get his client off the hook: it does not explain why anyone, including the lawyer's client, commits a crime, for generally speaking, the insanity plea is only an index of our ignorance as to the actual causes of criminal behavior; but the lawyer knows that the public, if convinced of it, is gullible enough to define the insanity of his client as a basis for his release.

moreover, when he modifies Max Weber's thesis. Weber, remember, posited an important relationship between two social movements in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1948). To Weber, the protestant reformation produced a characterological revolution which infused a potent enterprising spirit into both workers and entrepreneurs, thus leading to industrial capitalism. McClelland's contribution to this thesis shows how the one leads to the other, or more specifically, how the protestant work ethic led to the spirit of capitalism. Protestantism, he says, promoted certain patterns of thrift and productivity in the rearing of children, which in turn created the entrepreneurial character. Thus, achievement orientation is an important part of the entrepreneurial character; and industrial development results when large numbers of achievement-oriented people are recruited to fill managerial positions in the social system. For all of his emphasis on process, however, McClelland's basic thesis is that the effectiveness of an industrial community is derived from the achievement orientation of its people, that is to say, from their psychological motivations. He is thoroughly typical, therefore, of the traditional psychologists, who are always turning to such factors as stimuli, attitudes, conscious or unconscious motives, perception, cognition, and various features of personal organization in order to account for human conduct. In their sense, evil (as well as goodness, beauty, truth, and much else) is in the eye of the beholder.

The sociologists, meanwhile, have continued to stress kinds-of-situation theories which appeal, for example, to McClelland's opponents, who argue that America became great precisely because its frontiers provided a challenge and a stimulus to development, not because of the characteristics of its immigrants. It is further illustrated by Theodore Sarbin's emphasis on role playing to explain hypnosis: hypnotic behavior results, he says, when people play the game of doing what others expect them to do.[10] Another illustration is the explanation of deviant behavior by Robert Merton, who argues that rates of deviance are high in social structures that emphasize goal

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[10]See Theodore R. Sarbin and William C. Coe, Hypnosis: a Social Psychological Analysis of Influence Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 244-47 and passim.

attainment without providing access to legitimate means for achieving them.[11] Thus, the conventional sociologists have maintained the argument that people who commit deviant acts are not special kinds of people, for anyone, given the same sort of circumstances, would do the same sorts of things. Human beings, on this view, are merely organisms responding to environmental forces; and generally speaking, these forces are lodged less in nature than in the makeup of society--in its systems, structures, institutions, situations, roles, norms, and so forth. Individuals, therefore, are treated simply as passive media through which social factors operate, and their behavior is an expression of these factors.

The basic weakness in the conventional approaches of both psychology and sociology is their tendency to treat human behavior scientifically as the product of antecedent conditions, and thus to see people as witless organisms surrounded by internal or external forces that play upon them and determine their behavior. The advocates of such approaches therefore minimize the creative role of the individual as an active self and ignore the significance of others as co-creators in the rational construction of human conduct; and the idea of constructed behavior is disparaged as a humanistic notion constituting an end product that has undesirable consequences for the mechanistically minded: it displeases them because it means, at bottom, that the critical studies of psychological and sociological realities cannot be sensu stricto scientific.

The traditional approaches of psychology and sociology, furthermore, seldom take into account, and never adequately account for, the difference between human and nonhuman animal behavior; but the symbolically mediated interactionist perspective of social psychology rests squarely on that important distinction. This perspective was consistently advocated by George Herbert Mead, who regarded conceptual thinking as distinctively human and recognized language as a biological potential of man. Said Mead, in a most pertinent statement about symbolic interaction theory:

> If man could not first participate in nonverbal conversation and gestures, he could never communicate by means of language. Before language can convey meaning to a child, the behavior of its mother

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[11]Robert K. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure (New York: Free Press, 1968), 175-77, 185-248.

> must have meaning for it. The child could never understand the meaning of "angry" or "hungry" unless it first understood an angry or unnurturing gesture. The emergence of language depends upon the existence of already established albeit primitive social interaction; but language, once acquired, makes it possible to replace behavior with ideas.... Though a mother can teach her child the meaning of "I am angry" only by behaving in appropriate ways, once the child learns those words its mother need not behave in an angry fashion in order to communicate displeasure: having learned what the words mean, the child now has an idea of anger; and because mother and child now share this idea, the child can respond to what its mother says--not merely to what she does. It is now the mother, not merely her behavior, that communicates, since she intends to convey meaning and does it with words. Having the idea of anger, therefore, the child can think about its mother's anger, which has meaning for it even when she is absent or not angry.[12]

As the child acquires language, therefore, it acquires noetic structure;[13] and it becomes self-conscious by thinking, not solely of its mother's anger, but of itself and of its own behavior. The child, an I-self who thus constructs its me-self, can then stand outside of its me-self and view it as an object. Like its mother's anger, moreover, the attitudes of others can also modify the subjective conditions of its inner self, as well as the

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[12]Vernon W. Larsen, "Symbolic Interaction," an audiocassette (1975?) available in the Learning Resources Center of the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. Bibliographic note: Dr. Larsen, who is now retired from active teaching, found this quotation cited in some standard work on social psychology which he has subsequently lost or given away. Dr. Wright has therefore cited it from this audiocassette, since he has been unable to locate it and Dr. Larsen can no longer remember its source in Mead's writings.

[13]We may safely reject the oft-repeated notion of pragmatic naturalism that "human beings are born without minds," J. M. R. Delgado, Physical Control of the Mind (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 45. Whenever the naturalists have argued that "there is nothing in the mind at birth," the formalists have added "except the mind itself." We follow the formalists here by arguing that noetic structure, which is not the mind, must be acquired by a mind because it cannot be acquired by nothing. But pragmatists often insist that the mind, as well as the self, is derived solely from behavior because they reject psychophysical dualism in order to avoid positing a formal or supernatural reality as the thinking part of man. Thus, Mead's statements about the individual, the mind, and the self are often confused and somewhat circular. It makes sense, however, and may indeed be correct, to say that the individual constitutes the I-self, that the I-self is the mind, and that the mind constructs its me-self from the process of social interaction.

objective actions of its outer self; and as it matures, the child no longer merely adjusts to immediate expressions of approval and disapproval but actively changes its me-self in order to come into alignment with other people in its environment.

Symbolic interaction theory emphasizes realities which are neither in people nor in their natural, social, or cultural environments, but in the interaction process itself. These realities are truly interpersonal, because they require researchers to pay as much attention to the behavior of others as they give to the behavior of individuals or to organizational structure. In this framework, individual behavior is always linked to the behavior of others: the stubbornness of our children, in other words, is not a quality that resides solely in them, for we are part of the problem. Symbolic interactionism does not make the questionable assumption that the experienced uniqueness of a human being can be assessed by referring it to fixed points representing a variety of theoretically determined personality traits in all interpersonal situations; it insists, rather, that experience is unique--that it differs in each individual, in all other persons, and in every situation involving the same person. Yet, a typical personality appraisal instrument yields a single score for aggressiveness, say, in an individual. From the interactionist perspective, however, such traits as aggressiveness appear only when they are congruent with certain other behaviors and components of the self. This point is stressed by Arnold Rose, who makes the interaction process central to his social-psychological theory of neurosis by arguing that a negative attitude toward one's self is necessary for the development of neurotic behavior: an I-self simply cannot become neurotic unless it acquires a negative attitude toward its me-self. An important source of negative attitudes is therefore the negative reactions of other people to one's self. Thus, rejection and devaluation of my self by significant others leads me to a similar devaluation of my self, which in turn results in neurotic behavior. Neurosis will not occur in me, however, unless both of these negatives are present. I must perceive the reactions of other people toward me as negative evaluations of my self; but I must also accept my own

evaluation of my self as negative, for otherwise, I cannot be neurotic.[14] Bruno Bettelheim also makes this point in his comments on the characteristics of so-called feral children, like Amala and Kamala in "The Wolf Boy of Agra."[15] Comparison of "so-called feral children," he says, "with known and well-studied autistic children" who came to the Orthogenic Clinic at Chicago from middle class homes and exhibited all the characteristics of Amala and Kamala, strongly "suggests that their behavior is due largely, or perhaps entirely, to ... extreme emotional isolation combined with experiences which they interpreted as threatening their very existence."[16] Feral children, it seems, are produced, not when wolves behave like mothers, but when mothers behave like animals. Thus, there are no feral children; but there some very rare examples of feral parents, of human beings who become feral to one of their children.

Human beings, to put it simply, are able to take account of what another person is doing, or is about to do, and to control much of their behavior by constructing and directing rational conduct in terms of what they take into account. In a very real sense, therefore, people are constantly adjusting their own lines of activity in order to make them fit the actions of others. One of the key features of symbolic interaction theory is that the human being has a self, and that the self constitutes the central mechanism by means of which individuals face and deal with their worlds. The human being, that is to say, is not just your run-of-the-mill animal: it is apparently the only animal that makes indications to itself of things in its

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[14]Arnold M. Rose, "A Social-psychological Theory of Neurosis," in Human Behavior and Social Processes; an Interactionist Approach, ed. Arnold M. Rose (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 537-49. "If the reaction of others is generally negative, and the individual gets a correct perception of this negative reaction, and if he accepts this negative evaluation, our proposition is that the individual becomes neurotic," ibid., 540.

[15]See W. F. Ogburn, "The Wolf Boy of Agra," American Journal of Sociology, 64 (1959), 449-54.

[16]Bruno Bettelheim, The Empty Fortress; Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self (New York: Free Press, 1967), 381.

surroundings, and thus guides its actions by what it knows.[17] Note carefully, please, that environmental pressures, external stimuli, organic drives, and internal attitudes do not cover or explain the process of self-indication. Man and the world are indeed indispensable ingredients in self-indication; but both are distinct and separate from it, and neither is sufficient to explain it, because people are active subjects, not passive objects: they are agents who act for themselves and selectively participate in creating and manipulating their environments. Thus, they point out and interpret to themselves whatever comes to their attention by noting, say, a special social demand, observing that they are hungry, realizing that they wish to buy something, conscious that they dislike eating with someone they despise, or aware that they are thinking of doing some given thing. By indicating specific things to themselves, therefore, people come into contrast with the things they are considering, and they can act in relation to such things by defining, interpreting, accepting, rejecting, or transforming them in accordance with their purposes. Rational behavior, on this view, is never the determined result of pre-existing conditions, whether internal or external; it arises, rather, as an unpredictable emergent from the various ways in which people interpret and handle the particulars of specific situations in the actions they are constructing. The process of self-indication therefore exists in its own right: it must be accepted and studied as such, because knowledge of attitudes or of the social order, however sophisticated, does not enable anyone to predict the future actions of a human being.

The emergent quality of unpredictable human behavior is amusingly

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[17]Continuing scholarly ambivalence persists, however, on the question of animal intelligence, as in the differing views of Karl Popper and John C. Eccles. "Although we are both evolutionists," say these authors, "Eccles believes that the gulf between animal consciousness and human self-consciousness is wider than Popper thinks it to be," The Self and its Brain, viii. Cf. ibid., 519: "We do not seem likely to agree on the question of animal consciousness." Their differences may be seen as typical, more or less, of ongoing research on this problem. The authors of this paper, while accepting the tremendous sensory abilities of nonhuman animals, remain skeptical of their conceptual capacities; but we welcome convincing evidence to the contrary--if such should ever be forthcoming.

emphasized by Erving Goffman in an article entitled "On Cooling the Mark Out."

> A proposal of marriage in our society tends to be a way in which a man sums up his social attributes and suggests to a woman that hers are not so much better as to preclude a merger.... Refusal on the part of the woman, or refusal on the part of the man to propose when he is clearly in a position to do so, is a serious reflection on the rejected suitor.
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> A friendly movement in the direction of ... [an other] is a movement outward on a limb; [a man] ... communicates his belief that he has defined himself as worthy of ... [a woman's] society, while at the same time he places ... [her] in the strategic position of being able to discredit this conception.[18]

A fellow therefore makes a pass at a girl--and then waits for her reaction before making his next move. His initial move, even though relatively harmless, puts him out on a limb, in a position to be discredited. Thus, social ills are neither in the community of others nor in the eye of the beholder, for they appear more or less spontaneously as unpredictable emergents from a constructed process of interaction. Deviant behavior provides another example of this. A boy in pursuit of some interest or goal, which may or may not be deviant, takes account of his situation and makes a move. His next move, however, is not fully determined by the initial state of affairs which accounts for his first move, since he must now choose from new and different alternatives. The action he constructs will thus depend on himself as a actor and on his new situation in space and time; and meanwhile, the place or the time or both may have undergone considerable change. While he is deliberating about breaking into a parked car, for example, his buddy may get cold feet and chicken out, or a policeman may just happen to turn the corner. There are now new problems and possibilities that must be dealt with: certain moves are foreclosed, and others, which were not anticipated at first, have become inviting or may seem inescapable. Thus, our interpretations of new situations are not predetermined by antecedent conditions, but depend on what is taken into account and assessed in the actual situation in which behavior is formed. What symbolic interactionism provides, therefore, is a concept of the rational act as a tentative groping

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[18]Erving Goffman, "On Cooling the Mark Out; Some Aspects of Adaptation to Failure," Psychiatry, 15 (1952), 456.

or feeling-out process that is never fully determined by the past and is always capable of changing.

W. I. Thomas expressed an important concept in symbolic interaction theory when he said: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."[19] There is a refreshing quality about Glenn Doman's argument that there is no inherent reason why infants cannot learn to read fluently in several languages before they are six years old.[20] They haven't done that, of course, because we have defined them as being incapable of learning until they are six; and by acting from our definition of their situation, from the meaning of things to us, we have failed to give them the facilities or the opportunities for early creative development.

Do you remember Eliza Doolittle, the cockney flower girl in "My Fair Lady?" Recall, if you will, how Professor Higgins transformed her into a lady accepted in the best royal circles of English aristocracy. In this fictitious story, Eliza Doolittle summarizes poignantly the central concept of symbolic interaction theory when she says: "The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she is treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he has always treated me as a flower girl, and he always will; but I can be a lady to you, because you treat me as a lady, and you always will."

When Douglas McGregor was president of Antioch College, he frequently invited friends to sit in on sessions of its administrative council. This council, which included students as well as faculty, made most of the important decisions about university life. McGregor's friends, who sat in council and listened to its discussions blindfolded, were generally unable to distinguish between students and faculty by the wisdom of their comments. McGregor was making the point that young people frequently have the ability to make meaningful contributions to community issues but are kept from doing so by our definitions of their situations. This reiterates the major theme of The Human Side of Enterprise, in which McGregor argued that managers, a long time ago, defined workers as lazy, ignorant, lacking in initiative, and unwilling to assume responsibility. Then, because of this definition, they

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[19]In Herbert Blumer, An Appraisal of Thomas and Znaniecki's The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1939), 85, where Thomas quotes one of his unspecified earlier publications.

[20]See, for instance, his How to Teach your Baby to Read; the Gentle Revolution (New York: Random House, 1964), passim.

created a specific type of social structure, namely, an hierarchical organization with a short span of control; and with a short span of control, remember, each manager supervises no more than five or six other persons. In that kind of structure, of course, the supervisor is always breathing down the necks and looking over the shoulders of the workers, who are therefore not permitted to exercise initiative or assume responsibility--not, however, because of their inherent capacities, but because managers have first defined their situation in this way, and then created occupational structures and interacted with workers in ways that mold them in the image management has constructed for them.

Symbolic interactionism requires researchers to study the process of subjective interpretation through which rational behavior is constructed by taking the role of the acting subject whose behavior they are studying. This is the only way you can do it. Attempting to bypass the interpretive process by remaining aloof as a so-called "objective" observer and refusing to take the role of an acting subject is to risk the worst kind of subjectivism. Objective observers, that is to say, have a way of filling in the process of interpretation with their own guesses, rather than studying this process as it occurs in the subjective experience of another person. A blatant example of this procedure is found in one psychiatrist's explanation of a pyromaniac named "George," who had a strange compulsion to burn things.

> [In this] case of repeated burning of grass on vacant lots it was asserted that the lots symbolized the subject's father, that by driving onto the lot with his father's automobile the subject identified himself with his father and his sex organ and performed the act of incest on his mother, that the subject's effort to help in extinguishing the fires was symbolic of an unconscious wish to atone for his sin, and that the splashing of water on the fire was a symbolic repetition of a regression to the urethral phase of his libidinal development.[21]

This case is unusual only because of its extremeness. Its procedure, says Blumer, is common in the behavioral sciences, where experience is shunned for the hypothetical.

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[21]Donald R. Cressey, "Role Theory, Differential Association, and Compulsive Crimes," in Human Behavior and Social Processes, 458 n.8. For the full psychiatric account see Ernst Simmel, "Incendiarism," in K. R. Eissler, ed., Searchlights on Delinquency ... (New York: International Universities Press, 1966), 90-101.

> The prevailing mode in the social and psychological sciences is to turn away from direct examination of the empirical social world and to give preference, instead, to theoretical schemes, to preconceived models, to ... vague concepts, to sophisticated techniques of research, and to an almost slavish adherence to what passes as the proper protocol of research inquiry.
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> The road to ... empirical validation [in social science] does not lie in ... the [mechanistic] method of inquiry.... It is not to be achieved by ... elaborating catchy theories, by devising ingenious models, by seeking to emulate the advanced procedures of the physical sciences, by adopting the newest mathematical and statistical schemes, by developing more precise quantitative techniques, or by ... adherence to the canons of research design.... What is needed is a return to the empirical social world.[22]

Thus, the scientist's objective detachment from the empirical order of nature must be supplanted by the subjective involvement of the social scientist with the empirical social order, since it constitutes our only means of access to the ideative social order.[23] "No theorizing, however ingenious, and no observance of scientific protocol, however meticulous," can substitute for intimate "familiarity with what is actually going on" in human group life.[24] Symbolic interactionism encourages and provides firsthand acquaintance with the sphere of life under study. Thus, its preferred research techniques tend to be sensitive participation and immediate observation, rather than

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[22]Herbert Blumer, Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 33-34.

[23]Blumer thus rejects the primary empiricism of hard science in favor of an instrumental empiricism for social science because, while the natural phenomenon is completely and solely physical, the social phenomenon has both physical and formal aspects. Cf. H. Curtis Wright, "Shera as a Bridge between Librarianship and Information Science," Journal of Library History, vol. 20, no. 2 (Spring, 1985), 150: "The social order, unlike the natural order, is an ontological dualism constituted by (1) an empirical social order, which consists of people as behavers who do things, and (2) an ideative social order, which consists of people as thinkers who know things. Humanists regard the empirical social order as the only means of access to the ideative social order, whereas scientists treat the ideative social order as nonexistent and regard the empirical social order as a subset of the natural order. Science, that is to say, studies the behavior of human beings without reference to their minds; but humanism studies human behavior as the means of access to minds."

[24]Blumer, Symbolic Interactionism, 39.

experimentation under artificially controlled conditions. This demands immediate contact with what is going on, free exploration in an area, getting close to the people involved in it, observing action in a variety of situations, noting problems and observing how they are handled, being party to conversations, watching life as it flows along. The nature of the empirical social world has to be discovered by personal experience--absorbed through sustained cultural immersion in that world.

Some vital distinctions may further clarify the position of the symbolic interactionist. The role concept is important in social psychology because it provides a manageable concept for mediating between the psychological study of individuals and the sociological study of groups. It has been very useful, in a way, because, by emphasizing the interaction process, it has forced sociologists to focus on individuals and diverted the attention of psychologists to the social system. The role concept, then, is a nice mediating concept. But symbolic interactionists are not the only role theorists. Symbolic interactionism, as a matter of fact, is not concerned with the role process as it occurs in a person who is simply acting out the prescribed norms associated with given positions in the social structure. Such is the view of traditional sociology, which argues that the normative structure of society determines behavior: if people expect you to do something, in other words, you do it. This is the conventional role concept, and that is its received standard function, in orthodox sociology. But the symbolic interactionist sees the role process in a completely different light--as the kind of behavior that is constructed by an intelligent human being. Thus, the roles people play are devised, built, created, or conducted as behavioral performances in relation to similar roles which they impute to other people or to their environments. Your behavior, accordingly, is not solely a reflection of the expectations others have as to how you should behave: you take that into account, of course, and think about it; but you must also consider lots of other things in order to devise your performance on the basis of everything you take into account. You devise honest-to-goodness performances in this way; and to say that your behavior merely reflects the expectations of other people is simply not true. This breaks the dilemma created by the fact that so much human activity does not mirror expectations. The symbolic interactionist, who distinguishes between

rational conduct and instinctive behavior in human beings, does not expect it to do so.

Symbolic interactionism is not seduced by particular theories--like conflict theory, for example, which sees human behavior as organized basically in terms of conflict processes. Blumer states this clearly.

> Anyone who observes social interaction with open eyes should readily recognize that human participants ... meet each other's actions in diverse and varying forms.... To see all human interaction ... as ... some special type of interaction does violence to the variety of forms that one can see if he wants to look. The very fact that human beings make indications to one another and interpret each other's indications in the light of the situation in which they are acting should make it clear that the process of social interaction is not constrained to any single form. The task of the research scholar who is studying any sphere of social life is to ascertain what form of interaction is in play instead of imposing ... some preset form of interaction [upon it].[25]

Symbolic interactionists also tend to reject psychological "causes" of behavior, such as motives and attitudes. In the early fifties, the conviction that attitudes were the most meaningful unit of study was common among social psychologists. By that time, however, Walter Coutu had already introduced the term "tensit," a horrible neologism denoting the "tendency of a situation," to express his rejection of attitudes as a useful unit of study; and thenceforth, the psychologically oriented social psychologists have continued to focus on attitudes as a useful approach, but the symbolic interactionists do not. Thus, in books like Marvin Shaw's Theories of Social Psychology (1970), there are virtually no references to symbolic interaction theory.[26] But Shaw is a psychologist, and interaction theory has appealed mainly to sociologists as a viable alternative to structural-functional theory. Nevertheless, many prevalent orientations and formulations regarding specific social phenomena--such as theories of social learning, field theories, cognitive consistency theories, psychoanalytically oriented theories (including interpersonal and similar theories), and most group-process theories--are in large part specific applications, or at least close

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[25]Ibid., 54.

[26]Symbolic interactionism is conspicuously absent even in the second edition of this work by Marvin E. Shaw and Philip R. Costanzo (1982).

relatives, of symbolic interaction theory; and most of these are discussed in books like Shaw's.[27] Symbolic interactionists, however, do not deny things like the human need to achieve. They are fully cognizant, in fact, that human beings do impute meanings to things: we can be very concerned about getting ahead in the world, for example, and we are conscious of things like our possession or lack of skills. But these are things which the individual takes into account. Things like organic irritations, attitudes, impulses, and motives, on the other hand, which are so deeply embedded in the thinking of traditional psychologists, have no direct or uniform connection with the mobilization of human energy: they do not determine behavior. In symbolic interaction theory, motivation simply refers to the fact that a human being, as a participant in an ongoing social process, defines a problem situation as calling for the performance of a specific act with more or less anticipated consequences, and thereby his organism releases the energy appropriate to performing the act.

Thus, the symbolic interactionist perspective sees human behavior as in some sense indeterminate because it is always an emergent from past realities that may be conditioned by future possibilities. This perspective also de-emphasizes the unconscious as a motivator and emphasizes, perhaps too much, the rational nature of human conduct: this has sometimes been a criticism of the psychosocial interactionists, who must plead guilty as charged only if they expect symbolic interactionism to explain all human behavior--but not if they only use it to account for the specifically rational forms of human conduct.[28] The important thing about it, however, is that it brings

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[27]The psychologists and psychologically minded social psychologists are nevertheless being influenced by symbolic interactionism as evidenced by the appearance of "Symbolic Interaction and Role Theory," a major article by Sheldon Stryker and Anne Statham, in the prestigious Handbook of Social Psychology, Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson, eds. (New York: Random House, 1985), vol. 1, pp. 311-378. These authors speculate that "the rather remarkable shift to cognition-based social psychological theory" and "the resurgence of phenomenological thought in both sociology and psychology" explain why "students of ... cognitive processes find relevant symbolic interactionist discussions of how social life is constructed," ibid., 314.

[28]It is possible, moreover, to argue that Freud may not have discovered the unconscious after all: he could have invented it, because theories of tacit knowledge, for example, can explain virtually everything he explained

individual accountability back into the picture and portrays people, to some extent at least, as responsible agents who are constantly confronting issues, making choices, and suffering the consequences of their decisions.

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in terms of the unconscious without referring anything to the unconscious.